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FOR USCIRF DELEGATION

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR NOVEMBER 11-19 VISIT TO TURKEY OF  
THE U.S. COMMISSION ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

REF: A. STATE 178504

[1](#)B. ANAKRA 5735

[1](#)C. ANARA 5723

[1](#)D. ISTANBUL 1669

[1](#)E. ISTANBUL 1818

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[1](#)1. (U) This is a joint ConGen Istanbul-Embassy Ankara message.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Introduction: Mission Turkey welcomes the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to Turkey. We have arranged meetings for the delegation in both Ankara and Istanbul with Government officials, religious community leaders, academics, journalists, and NGO and business leaders in order to provide access to a wide variety of perceptions and opinions related to religious freedom in Turkey. This is a particularly interesting, potentially pivotal period in Turkey on these issues.

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Tradition of Tolerance, Era of Change  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) Turks pride themselves on what they describe as their country's long history of religious tolerance. They point to the 500 year history of Jews in Turkey, where they were welcomed after their expulsion from Spain, as well as to Greek, Armenian, and other Christian minorities who have historically been free to practice their faiths. Istanbul in particular has, for centuries, been a city where one can hear church bells or the call to prayer, or attend Friday evening services, all within a few hundred yards of one another. Today's Turkey is, however, about 99% Muslim. While legal structures and physical edifices reflecting Turkey's religious diversity remain, the reality is that the diversity -- and in some circles, tolerance for that diversity -- has waned.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Pressure to reverse that trend is one key aspect of Turkey's EU accession process. Even before the formal launch of accession negotiations in October 2005, the EU had focused on how minorities, including religious minorities, were treated. As a result, over the past four years, Turkey has undertaken serious reforms to bring its legal structures into line with those of the EU and to meet the so-called Copenhagen criteria, which include general human rights benchmarks. However, over the past year, one of the EU's critiques has been that the pace of reforms in Turkey has slowed noticeably. And one specific area on which the EU has focused is the need for Turkey to show progress on improving the rights of religious minorities and women.

¶5. (SBU) These are not popular issues here at a time when Turks have been dealing with a spike in terrorism at home and instability and conflict on their borders. In addition, Turkish pride causes them to bristle when faced with continued demands from Brussels. With a public increasingly soured on the EU process -- and uncertain as to whether Europe really wants them -- Turkish politicians have been reluctant to push through major EU-related reforms before parliamentary elections which must take place by November ¶2007. To help advance Turkey's candidacy, the government here has, however, pressed forward with a smaller package of 14 new laws.

¶6. (SBU) This package includes two laws with the potential to have an important impact on minority rights -- the Foundations Law, and the Law on Private Education Institutions. Parliament is in the process of passing a new Foundations Law, which would enable non-Muslim communities to reclaim some of the properties expropriated by the state over the years. Parliament adopted the Education Institutions Law in a watered-down form that failed to achieve the original goal of allowing non-Turkish citizens to attend religious school in Turkey, a key issue for all minority religious communities in Turkey and one that is at the heart of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Halki Seminary dispute. If, as a result of a separate issue (Turkey's obligations related to Cyprus), the EU partially suspends accession negotiations with Turkey in December, this would effectively stall any further reforms until after the 2007 elections.

¶7. (SBU) In many ways, Turkey is a country in flux. Today, less than 1% of the approximately 74 million Turks adhere to a non-Muslim faith. The predominant form of Islam in Turkey is Sunni. There are also an estimated 15-16 million Alevi, or heterodox Muslims. Officially a secular state, the government's Directorate of Religious Affairs (the Diyanet -- Dee-ah-NET) nonetheless trains and employs all imams.

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¶8. (SBU) Islam itself is undergoing a transformation within Turkey as forces of orthodoxy, modernity and Atatürkist traditions tug believers in different directions. Many Turkish Muslims, for example, belong to a variety of religious organizations such as the mystical Sufi organizations called "tarikats". While technically illegal, they attract many adherents and generally focus on one charismatic leader. One example is the Nakshibendis. In a recent headline-grabbing event, an Imam reportedly in line to succeed the current head of the Nakshibendi tarikat was stabbed to death in a mosque in a conservative district of Istanbul (ref d). His attacker was immediately killed by the Imam's fellow worshippers. Another example is the Gulenists. Large numbers of mainstream business leaders, civil servants and others follow the teachings of Fetullah Gulen, a charismatic Muslim leader and educator who has lived in the U.S. for some years. Gulen espouses interfaith dialogue, heads an international network of schools, and has strong ties to established media groups in Turkey.

¶9. (SBU) Generally, most religious Turks reflect a traditional Atatürkist attitude favoring secularism. A devout couple in a conservative Istanbul neighborhood was representative of mainstream believers when they told us all they sought was to worship God according to their own conscience and avoid anyone dictating the modalities of religious practice, while voicing concern that Islam might become too prominent a feature in Turkish politics.

¶10. (SBU) Religion and its appropriate role in society have become a lively topic of debate throughout Turkish society. Senior Turkish military leaders (who see themselves as the ultimate defender of Atatürk's modernist and secularist principles), in a series of recent speeches, stressed their concern about what they see as the threat of Islamic

fundamentalism. Newly appointed chief of the Turkish General Staff (TGS) General Yasar Buyukanit declared that Ataturk's principles were under "serious attack" and warned against those who want to "redefine secularism" as well as those who seek to tarnish the image of the Turkish military (ref b). President Sezer used similar words at the October 1 official opening of Parliament (ref c). This discourse is as much about the upcoming May 2007 presidential election (and whether Prime Minister Erdogan, whose wife wears a headscarf, should serve as the President of the secular Republic) as about the role of religion in public life. It is emblematic, though, of the shifts Turkey is undergoing and an opening of political debate on many issues, that presidents, generals, and prime ministers feel a need to speak openly on the topic.

¶11. (SBU) Tensions between the staunch secularists -- who see themselves as the defenders of the Ataturkist revolution -- and pro-Islam forces who want to see greater room for religious expression in public life were roiled in May when a gunman opened fire in the court that had ruled in favor of expanding the public sphere in which the headscarf may not be worn. One judge was killed and four were injured in the shooting. Thousands attended the funeral of the murdered judge, which subsequently turned into a massive pro-secular demonstration.

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Effects of Conflict, Broadcast Live  
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¶12. (SBU) The events in Lebanon and Israel this past summer reverberated in Turkey, in part due to very one-sided media coverage and political comment that focused on Israel's actions and largely excluded Hezbollah from responsibility. In Istanbul, thousands gathered to protest against Israeli actions, and anti-Semitic media and other attacks worried the city's Jewish community. The situation has since normalized. Recent violence in Gaza will likely inflame public anger again and could lead to another revival of pressures on Turkish Jews.

¶13. (SBU) The public response to Pope Benedict XVI's speech delivered at the University of Regensburg on September 12 was similarly negative. A popular view regarded the speech as a call for revival of the Christian empire once shared by Rome and Constantinople. Nonetheless, the Pope is set to visit Turkey later this month and will be received by President Sezer as a head of state.

¶14. (SBU) Turkey portrays itself as a bridge between civilizations. Prime Minister Erdogan, together with Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero, is co-chair of the UN-sponsored

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Alliance of Civilizations Initiative. Early this year, when the controversy was raging over cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed that had appeared in a Danish newspaper and violent crowds were in the streets in many Muslim countries, Turkey remained quiet, its demonstrations peaceful. Erdogan and Zapatero issued a joint call for tolerance and calm; Erdogan was the only leader of a majority Muslim country to do so.

¶15. (SBU) The USCIRF visit coincides with a meeting of the High Level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations, led by Rabbi Arthur Schneier, in Istanbul at which the Group will present its report to UN Secretary General Annan. Both Erdogan and Zapatero are slated to attend. The Pope's visit at the end of the month adds an extra dimension to the perspectives the Commission is likely to receive.

¶16. (SBU) We look forward to discussing these issues and others with the Commission upon its arrival in Turkey. The Commission's program should elicit a broad array of opinions and, consequently, a better understanding of the religious freedom situation in this country. For a more comprehensive view of the status of religious freedom in Turkey and how

various communities are affected, please visit the State Department's International Religious Freedom Report on Turkey at: [http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71413 .htm](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71413.htm).

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